



Retention by the numbers

Leveraging data to create a clear picture of student success

Overview

Oral Roberts University (ORU)—located in Tulsa, Oklahoma—is an interdenominational Christian liberal arts university founded in 1963 by evangelist Oral Roberts. ORU was founded to educate the whole person: mind, body, and spirit.

A comprehensive university dedicated to student outcomes, ORU offers more than 65 undergraduate majors as well as 14 masters-level programs and two doctoral degrees. The Tulsa campus is home to students from all 50 U.S. states and 83 countries.³ Faculty members educated at the nation’s top graduate schools serve as academic, professional, and spiritual mentors to this diverse student population.

A long-time D2L client, ORU recently reinforced its commitment to the Brightspace platform to get the most value possible out of their technology investment. By implementing the Brightspace Advanced Analytics solution, they’ve been able to put a “gold mine” of data within the platform to use and better understand key student success predictors and retention rates.

AT A GLANCE

| | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------------------|
| Client | Oral Roberts University |
| Students | 2,816 full-time, 216 part-time ¹ |
| Level | Postsecondary |
| Solution | Brightspace Advanced Analytics solution |

CHALLENGE

- Become an intelligence-driven organization
- Extract more value from technology investments
- Better understand student retention and improve it

SOLUTION

- Leverage data to gain insight into student performance
- Proactively assist students identified as “at-risk”

RESULT²

- Improved student retention by 23.8% in one semester
- 67% growth in full-time registration for online programs in one semester
- Improved instructors’ ability to visualize student performance
- Brightspace platform universally adopted by faculty members

 Challenge

KEEPING STUDENTS ON TRACK TO GRADUATION

Despite the economic and social benefits of completing a postsecondary education, only 56% of students who enter university successfully achieve their bachelor's degree within six years.⁴ Similarly, only 29% of students who start a two-year degree program finish within three years.⁵

The student retention challenge has implications beyond an educational institution's revenue and reputation. According to a study by the American Institutes for Research, taxpayers lost more than \$9 billion over a five-year period from costs related to students dropping out of four-year university programs.⁶

Like many postsecondary institutions, ORU is concerned about the retention challenge. "From a higher learning commission standpoint, our biggest issues pivot around reducing debt for students and making sure our faculty are the best faculty we can have," says Michael Mathews, CIO of ORU. "We can't afford to have students stumble through courses or drop classes because they don't like them or because they meet a learning barrier. If we have students not persisting through courses related to a program, that leads to a larger retention problem."

BETTER VISION AND INSIGHT INTO THE RETENTION NUMBERS

As ORU looked more closely at the factors influencing student success, persistence and retention rates, an even bigger challenge emerged. Although the university had been capturing data from online and hybrid courses within the Brightspace platform for five years, they desired a laser focused approach that captured every aspect of the student experience. ORU administrators wanted clearer insight of the university's retention rate—estimates put it anywhere from 50 to 60%.⁷ Additionally, the university needed proven and seamless tools to help instructors understand student performance, identify at-risk students, and proactively intervene for more successful outcomes.

"Our administration realized we needed to have more finite, precise, and real-time analysis of our persistence and retention rates and improving upon any gaps. Across the entire university and six colleges, we needed to drill down and take a look at the data. Through a true friendship and partnership, between the academic side of ORU and IT, we could get to the meaning behind the data and deliver back the answers administration needed when they needed them," says Mathews.



ANALYTICS TO MINE DATA

Brightspace is leveraged by 100% of ORU's faculty: the platform of choice for every class in both online and hybrid scenarios.⁸ ORU's online bachelor's degree program has been ranked in the top 10% of higher education institutions on the U.S. News and World Report's 2015 Best Online Programs list.⁹

Mathews and his team recognized that a lot of value could be found in the untapped "gold mine" of student-related data captured within the platform. To lead ORU's analytics initiative, the university hired Dr. Kenneth Berchenbriter, a 34-year IT and academic veteran with expertise in applying technology to improve operational performance within organizations. Dr. Berchenbriter was familiar with the Brightspace platform, having worked with it previously. He was an early adopter of the Brightspace Insights™ Student Success System™ for predictive analytics.

"Ken loves data. He likes looking at it, turning it, and twisting it and generating improvement opportunities. We knew we wanted to light up Brightspace Insights within the platform and sweet-talked Ken into joining the staff at ORU to take the project on," says Mathews.

BETTER DATA TRANSLATES INTO EARLIER GUIDANCE

"We wanted to give our instructors better information on what's happening in the classroom and the ability to examine performance on a course level, at a program level, and then across an entire area of academic focus," says Dr. Berchenbriter. "We were looking to give our faculty as much data as we could to allow them to be proactive versus reactive. If you wait too long and rely too much on mid-term grades and performance, it's just too late to intervene. Students will have gone through half the course and those at risk may consider dropping out."

"GREAT" STUDENT PERFORMANCE DATA

ORU began by leveraging the Brightspace Advanced Analytics solution for all its online courses and implementing a new early warning system via the Brightspace Insights Student Success System. The combination of these technologies allowed IT to present data collected from the Brightspace platform into meaningful views for faculty.

"Instructors needed to focus on where they needed to take action. It's like looking at your car's dashboard and seeing the 'check engine light.' You know something's wrong. Brightspace Insights and the Student Success System allow us to quickly spot when students are having problems and to drill into the details to discover problems with class components. We can also examine trends over time to see if the problem may be related to difficulty with a textbook, an assignment, or a certain instructor who may be having trouble teaching the class," says Dr. Berchenbriter.



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Dr. Kenneth Berchenbriter, Systems Analyst, Oral Roberts University

Solution continued

With Dr. Berchenbriter's experienced guidance, the Brightspace Advanced Analytics solution proved easy for ORU to implement. Within just one month, Dr. Berchenbriter and Mathews were already retrieving useful data. After three months, ORU was fully up and running and feeding instructors "great" student performance data.

"Faculty reaction has been positive," says Mathews.

"Instructors are using the pre-packaged components we provided and pulling additional data out of the system and into reports to gain even more insight. They aren't overwhelmed by the data and they know they don't have to look at everything. Rather, they are getting alerts from the system which point them in the right direction."



VISUALIZING ACADEMIC AND SOCIAL PERFORMANCE

Focusing on education that benefits the whole person, ORU takes great care to nurture the mind, body, and spirit of its students. Staying true to this goal, the institution has leveraged Brightspace to not only visualize a student's academic performance, but their social interactions as well.

"I was teaching an online class and noticed one of my students was interacting with only one other person in the classroom," says Dr. Berchenbriter. "After speaking with the student, I learned she had moved into the class from another cohort. So the dynamics of the group were already in place and it was hard for her to break in. The early warning system in Brightspace prompted me to encourage her classmates to work harder at folding her into discussions."

Dr. Berchenbriter notes that a data-driven early warning system such as the Brightspace Insights Student Success System becomes even more important in an online learning situation because instructors are unable to directly observe social behaviors.



After just one semester, ORU is developing a much clearer picture of its student persistence and retention rates. According to Mathews, the university has already seen its retention (persistence) rate increase from 61% to 75.5% just by having accurate information at hand.¹⁰ Full-time registration in ORU's online program has also increased by 67% over the same timeframe.¹¹ "We're not relying on guesswork anymore," says Mathews. "We have more precise data to work with and more detailed information."

He believes that adding the data component has helped ORU quickly progress toward its goal of getting more value from the Brightspace platform. "We're exposing more value all the time. We're using Brightspace for meetings with students, chats, and instructors are now adding more visual components, such as video, into their classroom instruction."

University faculty and deans are also using data to better engage students. "They can see so much more," explains Dr. Berchenbriter. "For instance, they may see data that shows a certain student performs really well on written assignments but does poorly on tests. That information helps an instructor zero in on that student, figure out why they are struggling, and provide help."

"If you sat down with any of our instructors at ORU, you would learn they are passionate about their subject and love teaching," Dr. Berchenbriter says. "They don't want their students to fail. If analytics and predictive modeling can help give our instructors back one more hour a week that they can devote to helping more students succeed, then I'd say we've done our job."

About D2L

D2L is the software leader that makes the learning experience better. The company's cloud-based platform—Brightspace—is not a common one-size-fits-all learning management system (LMS). It's easier to use, more flexible, and smart. With Brightspace, you can personalize the experience for every learner to deliver real results. The company is also a world leader in learning analytics: its platform predicts learner performance so that you can take action in real time to keep them on track. Brightspace is used by learners in higher education, K-12, and the enterprise sector, including the Fortune 1000. D2L has operations in the United States, Canada, Europe, Australia, Brazil, and Singapore. | www.brightspace.com

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